Roundtable  Using Qualitative Data Analysis-Part II: Issues in Representations  Suggestions For Positioning Interpretivist Consumer Research

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A roundtable session on qualitative consumer research methods, organized by Eric Arnould and Melanie Wallendorf, provided the inspiration for this note. As the discussion unfolded, the question of how to position interpretivist consumption research for journal submission, most especially to the Journal of Consumer Research, came to loom large.

The standard answer to this question is “always remember you are not studying context X but some broader theoretical issue that is manifested in context X.” The point being that interpretivist researchers, particularly less experienced ones, often become overly wedded to the details of their research context and, hence, their analyses suffer from being too descriptive, too particularistic, and lacking in theoretical abstraction. While the spirit of this advice is right on the money, it does not acknowledge that in fact, a certain kind of contextual framing can (and does) work exceedingly well. Conversely, the rhetorical emphasis on “theoretical positioning” is too vague on a very key question—what kind of theory? As I now see it, interpretivist papers published in JCR (as well as related journals like Journal of Marketing, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, Journal of Retailing, Consumption, Markets & Culture) are organized around one of three different positioning strategies. They are discussed below.

**High theory positioning**

These papers engage a significant theoretical debate about consumption issues that is playing out in another related source field (i.e., sociology, anthropology, media/cultural studies) and then build a case for the debate’s relevance to the JCR audience. This positioning is the high-risk and high effort strategy. To succeed, an author has to become very well-versed in this core debate and its unique theoretical history and then translate (and adapt) the key issues to the JCR literature. Pragmatically, papers positioned this way can be a very hard sell because some reviewers will not be up on the core debate (and will demand much more immediate JCR relevance) while others will push the authors to make an original contribution to the source field. In other words, here is your rock and here is your hard place.

This cautionary tale aside, a high theory positioning strategy can sometimes work quite well. Doug Holt’s (1998) article “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption,” drew from a theoretical debate underway in sociology. However, this article also demonstrated that this sociological perspective could revitalize consumer research on class and consumption. Consumer researchers, from across paradigms, are using ideas drawn from that paper. As a few other examples, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1990) and F lat and Venkatesh (1995) respectively won Journal of Consumer Research articles of the year with papers positioned along high theory lines.

In sum, strategy 1 is probably the toughest road to publication and, with rare exceptions, it certainly is not the strategy young scholars should adopt for their dissertations or journal submissions. On the plus side, an analysis following a high theory path can foster considerable intellectual growth, it can generate a plethora of ideas for future research, and when it all comes together really well, a pathbreaking article can result. At some point, I think writing a paper of this type is a worthwhile challenge but it is probably best treated as a down stream intellectual project.

**Theory-driven categorical positioning**

This positioning strategy tends to get lost in the standard advice of “remember you are not studying a context but a larger theoretical question.” This oversight is consequential because this second strategy is a straightforward and highly accessible approach (for both readers and writers). It has a much higher probability of success than strategy 1.

A lot of very rigorous and quite influential interpretivist consumer research has focused on broad categories of consumption phenomenon such as servicescapes, brand communities, brand relationships, subcultures of consumption, gift giving, etc. None of these domains are explanatory theories or even models per se. They describe a general category of phenomenon (i.e., there are many different brand communities, different kinds of servicescapes etc). You can mine these areas and develop a stream around them. For example, gift giving has generated a considerable amount of research that explores a nexus of psychological, social, and cultural dynamics related to these ritualized acts of consumption (see Belk and Coon 1993; Fisher and Arnold 1990; Joy 2001; Otnes, Lowery, and Kim 1993; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983; Wooten 2000).

However, this positioning is still very much theoretical in nature. For example, if you take up the topic of gift giving, you must also become familiar with an expansive and extensive cross-disciplinary literature that has theorized its various dimensions and your analysis must forge theoretical linkages to these canonical studies. Let’s take the case of brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2000; McAlester, Schouten and Kenig 2002). A researcher does not simply observe a variety of websites that are devoted to a particular brand—like Saab or Apple—and “see” a brand community. Rather, he/she must invoke theoretical knowledge to recognize an underlying commonality. In the case of brand community, the parallel phenomenon is fan communities, which have been studied extensively in the media studies literature. In a brand community, the brand functions in the role that a celebrity, musical group, movie, or television show serves for fan communities by providing a common point of interest and social linkage among a broad swath of consumers.

This kind of theoretical transfer is an excellent way to develop relatively novel marketing and consumer behavior concepts (e.g., brand communities) that can still be linked to a substantial body of theory. Such theoretical linkages can offer new perspectives on important theoretical questions (i.e. what is the nature of consumer-brand relationships?; how do communities emerge in a postmodern consumer society?) and they have the potential to resonate with a broader readership; factors which usually equate to a high impact article.

The set-up for articles positioned in this manner is very clean. You first make a case that this category of consumption is worth researching because it represents a socio-culturally significant practice (e.g., gift-giving) or it reveals a latent cultural tension or a nascent cultural trend (e.g., Rob Kozinet’s (2002) ethnography of the Burning Man festival) or that it is a likely place to discover something new and important about consumer motivations, choices, and experiences (see Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Price and Arnould 1993). You can invoke some combination of the three rationales and it does not hurt if your categorical phenomenon has
economic significance. Next, you make the case that your specific case is a good example of the category (i.e. river rafting is a good example of the extended service encounter; skydiving is a good example of high-risk leisure consumption). [This justification should be fairly self-evident; if not, rethink your general category].

After the set-up, you develop a systematic and nuanced interpretation using concepts most often drawn from sociology, anthropology, and social psychology, many of which may have already been applied in other JCR studies. In this positioning, a theoretical concept like ritual or cultural capital is simply a tool of explication. Reviewers sometimes get confused on this point. I have seen situations where an author uses a construct like ritual as an analytic tool and a reviewer will say, “oh, we already know about rituals” or “what is your contribution to the vast literature on rituals?” If you are aware of the distinction between a high theory contribution (i.e., we are using this consumption setting to create a general theory of ritual) versus a categorical positioning (i.e., we are using ritual to explicate something interesting about this broad class of consumption phenomenon), you can easily circumvent such objections.

Finally, the paper needs to end on a strong note that cashes out the key implications of its findings and offers some kind of compelling theoretical pay-off.

Arnould and Price’s (1993) “River Magic: Extraordinary Experiences and the Extended Service Encounter” is an excellent example of a theory-driven, categorical positioning strategy. Their positioning was two-fold: extraordinary experiences are an interesting and important class of consumption experiences and, second, that many kinds of extended service encounter (an important economic category) seek to deliver them. Then, Arnould and Price (1993) theoretically unpacked a specific kind of magical extended service encounter—river rafting—using the anthropological concepts of liminality, ritual, rites of passage, and communality. Finally, they delivered a theoretical pay-off by arguing that, contra existing theory, consumers’ satisfaction with the extended service encounter had little to do with their initial expectations; rather the drivers of satisfaction emerge through consumption experiences. Bingo, we have a very well-received and imminently readable JCR paper.

As a segue into the third positioning strategy, please note that it would have been possible, for Arnould and Price, using their same data, to have turned their article on its head. Arnould and Price’s (1993) main story could have been that the dominant theoretical explanation of customer satisfaction needed to be revised in a substantive way (a point derivable from prior studies suggesting gaps in the dominant theoretical view) and that the extended service encounter is a good categorical context for developing this new perspective. This alternative positioning strategy is one that Fournier and Mick (1999) developed with much skill (and success) using longitudinal data on consumers’ experiences with technology.

To clarify, I am not saying that Arnould and Price (1993) should have positioned their paper around satisfaction. If Arnould and Price had not been as adept at building a case for the CB relevance of river rafting/extended service encounter, however, they would have probably gotten editorial pressure to significantly reposition the paper. More generally, reviewers tend to either reject outright or demand a major repositioning (typically classed as a risky revision) whenever authors do not build a convincing case for the significance of their research domain. The critique usually says something like, “the implications you have buried in the discussion are really the important story but these ideas do not seem well integrated into the paper and they need to be pushed much further. So, lead off with these concluding points and redo the lit review and analysis to further enrich your new starting premises.”

At that point, you may face a choice (depending on the editor’s predilections). Do I seek to strengthen the case for the relevance of my categorical context and find a way to make the analysis seem more insightful and interesting or do I invest the effort needed to radically reposition the paper? I believe the answer to this question lies in positioning strategy #3.

Reconceptualizing Marketing’s core theoretical constructs

Customer satisfaction, brand equity, advertising persuasiveness, customer relation management, consumer lifestyles are some of marketing’s core concerns and each has a specific body of theory to explain them. These theories may have been originally borrowed from psychology and other fields but they have been developed and thoroughly integrated into the marketing canon. Some of the most highly cited and award-winning papers in the interpretivist literature have used qualitative data to develop a novel experiential or cultural perspective on these chestnut constructs (Fournier 1998; Holt 1997; Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliott 1999). This kind of theoretical positioning tends to be a much easier sell to reviewers and to be embraced by a broader swath of readers than the high theory approach (strategy one) but it can pose some pitfalls which probably would not arise with a theory-driven categorical positioning (strategy 2).

For one thing, you really need to do your homework on the mainstream theoretical construct. This positioning strategy will inevitably invoke critical concerns that your argument is based upon a theoretical strawman. So, be very careful to recognize the sophistication and nuances of the core marketing theory being engaged and, second, the kinds of domains where it is most (and least) applicable. Per this latter point, the least contentious way to challenge an established theory is to make a sound case that it systematically ignores some important aspects of a given phenomenon be it satisfaction (Fournier and Mick 1999) or brand loyalty (see Fournier 1998) or consumer value systems (Holt 1997; Thompson and Troester 2002). Although I find the “blind researchers and the elephant” allegory philosophically problematic, the rhetorical claim that an established theory is not wrong only incomplete tends to invoke less strident counter arguing.

Now let’s assume you have submitted a paper positioned via strategy #2 (i.e., theory-driven categorical positioning) and the reviews come back suggesting a massive repositioning and reanalysis. If the proposed new positioning points you toward a chestnut marketing issue, revising along those lines could well be the most efficacious means to negotiate the review process and there is a reasonable chance that your overall disciplinary impact will be increased.

Alternatively, let’s say, you are undertaking a study (or dissertation) that has been designed around a strategy # 2 and, during the write-up, you realize that your findings have a lot to say about some marketing chestnut. Under that scenario, I suggest you seriously consider turning the paper (or dissertation) on its head. An immediate benefit is that your perceived marketing relevance and (personal marketability) will go way up. Once again, your path to publication is also likely to become less arduous and the disciplinary impact of the study may well be enhanced. The downside is that you will have to do a lot of rewriting (your whole lit review might have to change) and your analysis will likely have to be reworked considerably to systematically model the how, when, and why aspects of the new focal questions.

If the project is a dissertation, odds are you will not have the time to undertake such a massive transformation. So, write up the project as designed and get your degree. You can undertake the inversion when you start converting the dissertation into a journal article.
Thanks much for reading through this and I hope you found some value in it.

SELECTED REFERENCES
All cited papers are from the Journal of Consumer Research except: